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Interstate Abortion Bill Nears Passage

By LAURIE KELLMAN, Associated Press Writer

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Taking a teenager across state lines to get an abortion without a parent's knowledge would become a crime punishable by prison under a bill that headed toward Senate passage Tuesday.

Struggling to defend their majority this election year, Republican sponsors said the bill supports what a majority of the public believes: that a parent's right to know takes precedence over a young woman's right to have an abortion.

"No parent wants anyone to take their children across state lines or even across the street without their permission," said Senate Majority Whip Mitch McConnell, R-Ky. "This is a fundamental right, and the Congress is right to uphold it in law."

Bowing to public support for parental notification and the GOP's 55-44-1 majority, Democrats spent the day trying to carve out an exemption for confidants to whom a girl with abusive parents might turn for help. They complained that the measure is the latest in a series of bills designed chiefly to energize the party's base of conservative voters.

"Congress ought to have higher priorities than turning grandparents into criminals," said Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, D-Mass.

The measure would make taking a pregnant teenager over state lines to obtain an abortion a crime punishable by fines and up to a year in prison. The girl and her parents would be protected from prosecution and an exception would be made in cases where the pregnancy endangered the teen's life.

Polls suggest there is widespread public backing for the bill, with almost three-quarters of respondents saying a parent has the right to give consent before a child under 18 has an abortion.

States that do not have parental notification or consent laws are Washington, Oregon, New York, Vermont, Rhode Island and Connecticut. The District of Columbia also does not have such laws.

No one knows how many girls get abortions in this way, or who helps them do it. But Democrats say the policy would be dangerous to pregnant teens who have abusive or neglectful parents by discouraging other people from helping them.

"We're going to sacrifice a lot of girls' lives," said Sen. Hillary Clinton, D-N.Y.

Sen. Jim DeMint, R-S.C., countered that opponents "want to strip the overwhelming majority of good parents their rightful role and responsibility because of the misbehavior of a few."

Democrats proposed several amendments during Tuesday's debate, including one sponsored by Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., to protect such confidants as grandparents, clergy and others to whom a girl might turn for help.

Another, sponsored by Sen. Frank Lautenberg, D-N.J., would have encouraged the federal government to provide money for more sex education, but it failed 48-51.

"If we do nothing about teen pregnancy yet pass this punitive bill, then it proves that this (bill) is only a political charade and not a serious effort to combat the problem," Lautenberg said.

Abstinence is the best way to prevent teenage pregnancy, responded Sen. Tom Coburn, R-Okla.

"How many people really think it's in the best interest of young people to be sexually active outside of marriage? Does anything positive ever come from that?" Coburn asked.

The bills are S. 403 and H.R. 748.

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